Remarks on January 17, 2010 regarding the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. helped me and many others see the connection between what I believed as a Christian and the life of the world including the sad reality of pervasive racism.

My first encounter with racism was simple and in my own neighborhood. A little African American boy, George Tooks, came to our house once and my father later told me that neighbors complained to him and a petition was circulating to make sure none of those people tried to buy or rent a house and actually live in our neighborhood.

A few years later an African American freshman at my college showed up at one of my fraternity's rush parties and showed interest in becoming a member. I recall the meeting when the matter was discussed, "What if he wants to live in the house?" "What if he shows up at a party and asks your girlfriend to dance?" It was a heated discussion: someone suggested that we table the matter, settle down and think about it, which we did. The next thing I knew there was a special meeting called: the head of the national fraternity, from Atlanta, wanted to address us. I'll never forget that meeting either. He said that of course we were free to choose whoever we wanted to be one of our brothers, but because we are all brothers in this national fraternity, there are many brothers in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina who just wouldn't understand why we would ever do such a thing: break our bonds with them over this single potential pledge. "Please, men" (we were boys), he said, "don't do this to your brothers."

We didn't. It was actually a close vote.

It left a mark on my soul and it was a brilliant African American preacher with a PhD from Boston University who helped me see the connection between my religious faith, which was deepening and broadening, and the sin of racism in our society, its institutions, organizations, its economic practices and its laws.

Martin Luther King, Jr. helped me to see the hope, the possibility, that the Church could, and should, be an agent in the opposition to and dismantling of the structures of racism I had experienced – in my neighborhood, my fraternity. Martin Luther King, with his eloquent dream of a society, a nation, which lived out its founding vision, a revolutionary vision of a nation where every person is free and afforded equal opportunity, a just society that reflected the Biblical vision of justice flowing down like waters – it was Martin Luther King who inspired the hope and helped me see that the job of the followers of Jesus Christ was to oppose

racism in society and to model a community based on God's inclusive love for all.

I'm not the only clergyperson whose vocation was inspired by the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. During the '60s as ministers preached, religious people of faith demonstrated, getting arrested, Reinhold Niebuhr said the Civil Rights Movement was saving churches from irrelevance. Things did change, have changed, in our country and its institutions and its churches. We are not in the Promised Land, but we are a lot closer than we were forty years ago.

And so, as we remember him this week, I will give thanks to God for his life, his courage, his hope and his faith and the promise of his dream.

Merciful God, we thank you for raising up men and women to be prophets, apostles, faithful followers: for Martin Luther King - his vision, courage and impatience. O God keep us from complacency: make us impatient when your dream for the world is denied. Give us renewed faith and love for you and for all your children. Startle us again with your love. In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen